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Offense and Harm as Predictors in a Third-Person Effect Variation Study

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ABSTRACT

Offense and Harm as Predictors in a Third-Person Effect Variation Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how personal offensiveness to, and perceived harmfulness of, violent and sexual film content relates to the setting of minimum age limits for viewing movies containing examples of each. Using third-person effect as a theoretical framework, a 2x2 experiment was conducted. Subjects were asked to assess how harmful they believed what they viewed was, and, instead of responding to "effects on self" items, subjects indicated levels of personal offensiveness to the material. It is hypothesized that subjects will find sex more offensive than violence, and personal offensiveness will outweigh perceived harmfulness as affecting behavior (setting a minimum age limit for viewing). Findings are mixed: although sex appears to not be more offensive than violence, personal offensiveness does seem to outweigh perceived harmfulness when setting a minimum age limit for viewing sexual and/or violent movie content.

Introduction

Virtually every medium has some mechanism in place for restricting access to particular works by people under a certain age. For example, a child under the age of 18 cannot purchase *Playboy* magazine at a newsstand. Further, in many stores the magazine is located behind the cashier, preventing a child from even looking at it. Musical albums containing adult language come with a warning label. Some media, like the Internet and television, use technology in the forms of filtering software or the v-chip (respectively) to help parents restrict their children's access to adult material. The movie industry, television networks, and video game makers use age-based ratings systems to inform parents about the appropriateness of various works for their children.

In the movie industry, the responsibility of assigning ratings to films belongs to the Motion Picture Association of America's (MPAA) Classification and Ratings Administration (CARA), a system established in 1968 (Farber, 1972). Although the movie ratings system has gone through some permutations, it has maintained a hierarchical structure from least (the G rating) to most (X, and later the NC-17, rating) restrictive category since its inception. Today, a movie rated G, PG, or PG-13 can be seen by anyone, whereas children under the age of 17 must be accompanied by an adult to see an R-rated movie, and no children under that age can see an NC-17-rated movie (Valenti, 2000).

How movies are assigned their ratings has been the subject of harsh criticism from CARA members themselves (Farber, 1972), the scientific community (Cantor, Harrison, & Krcmar, 1998; Linz, Wilson, & Donnerstein, 1992; Wilson, Linz, & Randall, 1990), and the Supreme Court (Ramos, 1990) to name a few. Perhaps the earliest attack came from Farber, one of two graduate students hired in 1968 by MPAA president Jack Valenti to assign ratings to

movies. After leaving CARA six months into a one-year appointment, he pilloried the film ratings system, the members of CARA, and Valenti himself, first in an essay for the *Los Angeles Times,* then again in his book *The Movie Rating Game* (1972). Two of Farber's (1972) primary charges were that movies containing sex and nudity received more restrictive ratings than ones containing violence, and, more importantly, that "much of the classification [of movies] was actually done with an eye to what disturbs *adults* [his emphasis], G-rated [suitable for general audiences] movies were not necessarily those most suitable for children; they were the ones the board considered least likely to offend adults" (p. 31).

These two criticisms intersect and provide the context for this study. To use Farber's (1972) words, the problem is that adults are more apt to restrict children's access to material by which they (adults) are "disturbed"—sex—than to material that may actually not be "suitable" for young people—violence. This criticism was reiterated nearly 20 years later by Wilson et al. (1990) and Linz et al. (1992) in their studies of, and recommendations for changes in, the movie ratings system. Although they never refer to Farber directly, Wilson et al. (1990) express a concern that by continuing to do exactly what he (Farber) claimed two decades earlier—targeting sex over violence (that which is personally offensive over that which is deleterious to children)—CARA was helping expose young people to material that was harmful to them. Part of both of their (Linz et al. 1992; Wilson et al. 1990) arguments was that, if harmful effects can be more conclusively linked to violent media than sexual media (e.g., Donnerstein, Linz, & Penrod, 1987; Harris, 1994; Zillmann, Bryant, Comisky, & Medoff, 1981), then why do people who are responsible for restricting access to materials of these kinds focus on sex as opposed to violence? Individuals' personal offensiveness to, and perceived harmfulness of, movie sex and violence are the basis for this third-person effect variation study.

Theory

Davison (1983) introduced the phrase "third-person effect" to communication research. Third-person perception addresses people's belief that others are more affected by persuasive media messages than they themselves are. Third-person effect refers to how the perceptual element could influence an activity, such as support for censorship of some kind. The perceptual component has generated more research (McLeod, Detenber, & Eveland, 1999) than its behavioral counterpart, with relatively robust findings (Perloff, 1993). However, in a meta-analysis, Paul, Salwen and Dupagne (2000) note that these findings may be related to an over-reliance on student samples.

Davison (1983) originally tested third-person perception by comparing the effect of persuasive communication (political messages and television commercials) on self and others. Researchers have looked at third-person perception and several types of media messages, including campaign messages (Salwen, 1998), negative political advertising (Cohen & Davis, 1991), product commercials and public service announcements (Gunther & Thorson, 1992), advertising (Brosius & Engel, 1996), a television miniseries (Lasorsa, 1989), rap music (McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997), pornography (Gunther, 1995; Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996), violent television programs (Rojas et al., 1996), and news (Cohen, Mutz, Price, & Gunther, 1988; Driscoll & Salwen, 1997; Perloff, 1989; Price, Huang, & Tewksbury, 1997; Price & Tewksbury, 1996). All of these authors demonstrated some third-person effect in their studies. Glynn and Ostman's (1988) study was an exception; they found no support for third-person effect research questions.

Gunther and Mundy (1993) found that third-person perception relies on the type of media message. They designed an experiment that included "beneficial" and "harmful" messages

(magazine or newspaper clippings), and found that while people believed others were more affected by negative material than themselves, there was no difference in terms of the positive material. They attribute this difference to an optimistic bias and the concept of "ego-enhancement," which refers to people's desire to reinforce their own self-esteem by viewing themselves as smarter or somehow superior to others. Other possible factors affecting people's overestimation of effects on others in third-person models include self-perceived estimates of expertise (Driscoll & Salwen, 1997; Lasorsa, 1989; Mutz, 1989), or one's level of education (Tiedge, Silverblatt, Haivice, & Rosenfeld, 1991). Lasorsa (1989) provides a useful caveat to understanding the relationship between self-perceived expertise or knowledge and *actual* knowledge on a subject. He compared the two "types" of knowledge (perceived and actual), and found that people who perceived greater media influence on others did not necessarily know more about the subject. Age (Tiedge et al. 1991), media orientations (Price et al. 1997), and media use (Salwen et al. 1998) have all been used in third-person effect research as well, with age suggesting a more conclusive relationship than the other contingent factors.

In terms of behavior, third-person effect has been tested most in the context of support for censorship, including song lyrics (McLeod et al. 1997), pornography (Gunther, 1995; Rojas et al. 1996), and television violence (Rojas et al. 1996). The primary reason people support censoring these media messages seems to be to protect others from something that may be harmful to them. This study coincides with previous third-person effect work in this context. Here, the dependent variable is setting minimum age limits for viewing various combinations of sexual and violent movie content. Setting a minimum age limit parallels the MPAA's approach to age-based self-regulation, and it can also be construed as a form of censorship. Instead of saying that *no one* should see the material, by setting an age limit, a respondent is saying that people under a certain

age should not have access to it. Doing so falls short of censorship in the form of governmental or legal restriction, but it does parallel the age-based ratings system now in place.

On the other hand, this study departs from a standard third-person study in two significant ways. First, the behavior in question is not support of censorship per se. Instead, subjects are asked to set a minimum age limit at which children may view examples of movie content with one of four combinations of sexual and violent content. Essentially, the adults in this study are asked to do what the people responsible for assigning ratings to films are asked to do—set an appropriate age limit for access to various types of content.[1] Subjects are asked to support regulation for a segment of the audience based on age, but not for all people, including adults. This study represents a very specific and focused application of the behavioral component of third-person perception—adults' opinions about restricting children's access to sexual or violent media content. Like the Supreme Court, which supported variable-obscenity decisions,[2] and the age-based film ratings system, adult subjects are asked to provide answers that apply to "the children," a group in need of protection and for whose welfare society's adults are somewhat responsible.

The second way this study departs from a conventional third-person model is that, although there are "personal offensiveness" items and "effects on others" (adults and children) items, there are no "effects on self" items. For this reason, the study is offered as a variation of third-person perception. Based on the study's goal, which is to position personal offensiveness to film sex and violence as a counter to people's perceived harmful effects of each, and determine which one has a greater influence on belief in content restriction, effects on self items would not be very useful. This is due, in part, to the fact that the items related to perceived harm are derived from specific harmful media effects, and are not phrased in a general way. Using

imitation as an example, while subjects will most likely assess the degree to which they believe children imitate what they see, it is unlikely that they would admit to a similar effect in themselves. It is important to keep in mind that subjects' perceptions of harmful effects of movie sex or violence may not coincide with researchers' understandings of the two types of content. For the purpose of this study, it is more important to have a picture of what people think than what research suggests. This does raise the question of whether "personal offensiveness" constitutes a harmful effect on the self. In terms of film ratings, critics (Farber, 1972; Wilson et al. 1990), argue that it is not.

Researchers have begun to explore different perceptual dimensions underlying the third-person effect. McLeod et al. (1997; 1999) employ a variable related to *personal offensiveness* in studies using song lyrics as stimuli. The authors describe this offensiveness variable alternatively as "perceived social desirability of the 'message'" (McLeod et al. 1997, p. 164) and "perceived anti-social nature of the content" (McLeod et al. 1999, p. 9). As a variable, McLeod et al. (1999) offer two possibilities as theoretical definitions for "perceived anti-social nature of the content": "This could simply be a function of overt hostility toward the message, or it could be a function of greater [perceived] potential harm to society" (p. 9). In other words, they deem perceived harm and personal offensiveness as interchangeable under the umbrella of "anti-social nature of the content" (McLeod et al. 1997; McLeod et al. 1999). In the first study, McLeod et al. (1997) did not find a significant relationship between "social desirability" and support for censorship of rap music. When presenting two separate models for effects on self and effects on others in the second study, perceived anti-social nature of the content had a *negative* relationship with perceived impact on self and no relationship to perceived effects on others (McLeod et al. 1999).

Refinement of these dimensions has emerged in recent research. Salwen and Dupagne (1999) used "media influence" and "immoral consequences"—two dimensions that reflect a separation between perceived impact on people and personal offense—in their study. Among their findings was that perceived immorality effects predicted support for restrictions for television violence, the issue in their telephone survey with the "clearest moral dimension" (p. 523). Other research on third-person perception has shown a significant relationship between perceived harm and support for censorship. Gunther (1995) found that the more harmful subjects believed pornography was, the more negatively they felt others were influenced by it and the greater they supported censoring it. Rojas et al. (1996) had similar findings: "the third-person effect appears to be contingent on the message being perceived as potentially harmful. This perception also seems central to the advocacy for censorship" (p. 182). Though they focused on individuals' willingness to censor advertising, Shah, Faber, and Youn (1999) also found a relationship between that behavior and judgments about the severity of, and (others') susceptibility to, communications.

The desire to follow the lead of Salwen and Dupagne (1999), Gunther (1995) and Rojas et al. (1996) reflects my belief that it is necessary to distinguish between the constructs of offensiveness and perceived harm in third-person perception research, especially when looking at a behavioral component like support for censorship, or in this case regulation. The difference between the two possibilities is crucial in terms of content restriction through film ratings. If, ultimately, the goal of film ratings is to restrict the access of children to various types of content because it is harmful to them, then one's personal offensiveness is irrelevant. For these reasons, measures of "personal offensiveness" have been added to this study, so that the relative importance of both variables, operationalized as two *separate* measures, can be determined.

The harmful effects

It is crucial that the harmful effects chosen for this study serve this purpose; they must facilitate questionnaire items that subjects can logically apply to both sexual and violent content.

Aggression

The relationship between viewing television violence and subsequent antisocial behavior is a frequent target of researchers and meta-analyses (Comstock & Scharrer, 1999; Paik & Comstock, 1994). But, despite network television's increased sexual content in prime time, it does not provide an adequate comparison to violent content. Movies, on the other hand, can contain comparable levels of sex and violence that can be linked to increased aggression in viewers. In this context, links between viewing portrayals of sex and violence and subsequently aggressing are often couched in studies of pornography. While the focus here is not on pornography, previous research in this area yields some important information reflecting diametrically opposed views of this material.

A central issue related to pornography (and this study) that researchers have contemplated is: "Is it the sex or is it the violence"? Answering this question reflects disagreement that exists among researchers. Donnerstein et al. (1987) do not believe that the exhibition of nonviolent sex has an adverse effect on behavior or attitudes, in their meta-analysis of the effects of pornography. On the other hand, Allen, D'Alessio, and Brezgel (1995) did not find significant differences between the effects of nonviolent and violent pornography on aggression, concluding that "the bulk of the findings are inconsistent with the primary tenets of those arguing that negative effects from pornography stem from the violence in the material" (p. 271).

How do studies of pornography apply to this study of movies and the MPAA film ratings? Yang and Linz (1990) found that while there is more sex in X- (or the clever marketing tool, XXX- rated) films than R-rated films, and similar levels of sexual violence in both, there is more violence in R-rated movies. Additionally, Malamuth (1993) suggests that a problem with MPAA film ratings is that there is a greater concern over the amount (or explicitness) of the violent and/or sexual portrayal than its context:

> The presence or absence of sexually arousing stimuli....does not suggest that sexual explicitness per se is the critical factor affecting the potential harm of exposure to certain media stimuli. On the contrary, a PG-rated film showing rape in a positive light could be more socially detrimental than an X-rated film without sexual violence (p. 571).

Imitation

Albert Bandura's (1979) social learning theory provides the ideal framework for the discussion of the effects of media images on behavior. Bandura (1994) describes four conditions for social learning of media violence: The violent behavior of the actor must be seen, read, or listened to (attentional process); cognitive representations of the violent behavior must be retained (retention process); the learner must have the potential to replicate the action (production processes); and the learner must have sufficient desire or will to perform the violent behavior that was witnessed (motivational processes). Better known as "imitation," Bandura (1994) links learned behaviors to observing media violence.

Imitation of viewed violence is an often-used behavioral approach to studying the effects of different media on adolescents, the basic rationale being that children watch (television or film) characters solve problems with violence and subsequently may learn that this is an appropriate way to behave. What if the same standard is applied to sexual content and children's behavior? The first step—sexual or violent content being seen—is a central issue in this study. If the MPAA is determined to prevent viewing of a film's most graphic or explicit sexual or

violent content, are they trying to halt the process of social learning and the possibility for imitation? Regarding the retention process, it can be argued that sequences with the most graphic sexual or violent content can be a film's most memorable, and therefore most readily retained. The final two components deal with the learner's replicability of viewed material and desire to perform the behavior. In isolated tragedies, like the one at Columbine High School, society's fears about children replicating media violence are paramount. On the other hand, it is not unreasonable to think that Bandura's notion of imitation can be applied to adolescents' replication of viewed sexual content *more* appropriately than it can be to violent content.

Desensitization

The final harmful effect that will serve as a basis for items on the questionnaire is desensitization. According to the *National Television Violence Study* (1997), a positive relationship exists between watching "extensive/graphic" television violence and becoming increasingly desensitized to portrayals of that kind. Since the relationship is based on how graphic and/or intense a portrayal is (or becomes as a scene progresses), the application of this consequence to both sexual and violent content is appropriate.

Lowered responsiveness to violent stimuli as a result of viewing television violence has been supported in many studies (Cline, Croft, & Courrier, 1973; Comstock, 1991; Donnerstein et al., 1987; Drabman & Thomas, 1974; Linz, Donnerstein, & Adams, 1989; Thomas, Horton, Lippencott, & Drabman, 1977; Thomas, 1982) prior to the *National Television Violence Study* (1997). Linz, Donnerstein, and Penrod (1984, 1987, 1988) had similar findings using more graphic film portrayals and longer periods of exposure. Unlike the two previous harmful effects discussed, the validity of a "real-world" behavioral correlate is questionable. Comstock and Scharrer (1999) claim that the findings surrounding desensitization to graphically violent media

portrayals cannot be applied to real-life violence. Nevertheless, if subjects believe that media portrayals desensitize "adults" or "children" to real-life actions, they should be more inclined to set higher age restrictions for material that they think lowers responsiveness most.

Research hypotheses

H1: There is an interaction between violence and sex such that people will find films with "high sex/low violence" movie content as being more offensive than films with "low sex/high violence" movie content.

"Offense" refers to the degree to which a person is made to feel uncomfortable, irritated, or even angry after exposure to a stimulus. "Offense" can have a moral dimension in that a stimulus can serve as an affront to one's personal "codes" of right and wrong or propriety and impropriety. In general, "sexual movie content" refers to portrayals of kissing, fondling, stroking, foreplay, the removal of clothing, nudity, seductive dancing, sexual practices involving (simulated) penetration (alone or with other character(s)) or any combination of these elements. "Violent movie content" refers to portrayals of murder, the infliction of bodily harm, the presence of blood, or any combination of these elements. "High" or "low" refers to the relative level of explicitness of the violent or sexual content. "High sex/low violence" refers to a specific combination of these two types of content used in this study. More specifically, the clip representing "high sex/low violence" is a scene depicting simulated coitus between a male and female character, and containing female nudity such as exposed breasts and/or pubic hair. Likewise, "low sex/high violence" refers to a specific combination of these two types of content used in this study. That stated, the clip representing "high violence/low sex" is a scene depicting simulated acts of assault or murder between characters, as well as simulated shedding of blood. As is suggested by criticisms of the MPAA's film ratings system (Farber, 1972; Linz et al. 1992;

Ramos, 1990; Wilson et al. 1990), depictions of simulated sexual behavior are more likely to cause discomfort, anger, or irritate people than depictions of simulated assault or murder are.

H2: There is an interaction between violence and sex such that people will find films with "low sex/high violence" movie content as being more harmful than films with "high sex/low violence" movie content.

"High sex," "low sex," "high violence," and "low violence" are defined above. "Harmful to viewers" is defined as an individual's perception of how detrimental, or potentially damaging, a stimulus can be to people. It is important to keep in mind that subjects' *perceptions* are being taken into account here. That stated, the "real-world" focus in the media and among politicians on the harmfulness of media violence, however oversimplified and inflated it may be, will lead subjects to view movie violence as more detrimental to people than movie sex is. Finally, "low sex/high violence" and "high sex/low violence" movie content are both defined above.

H3: There is an interaction between violence and sex such that people will set higher minimum age limits for viewing a movie containing "high sex/low violence" movie content than for one containing "low sex/high violence" movie content.

Setting a minimum age limit for viewing a scene refers to subjects' answer to the question, "How old do you think a person should be before he or she sees a movie with a scene like this in it?" It is suggested that people will place a greater level of restriction on material that offends them (sexual content) than material that they believe is harmful to others (violent content).

H4: Personal offensiveness will have a greater effect than perceived harm on people's setting of minimum age limits for viewing movies containing highly sexual and/or highly violent content.

All terms are defined above. Theoretically, it is believed that people will support greater levels of restriction, or demonstrate more "censorious" behavior, toward material that irritates or makes them feel uncomfortable than to material that they believe may be damaging to others.

Method

A 2x2 factorial experiment was conducted with undergraduates enrolled in one of four sections of an introductory film studies course at a public northeast university. Subjects viewed one of four randomly assigned movie clips. Each clip is approximately three minutes in length, and is from a theatrically released movie. Subjects viewed the clips in a classroom used for regular meetings of their film studies courses; the room is equipped for film and video projection. After viewing the scene, subjects completed the questionnaire.

Questionnaire items

After the clip is shown, subjects were asked to complete 12 items related to personal offensiveness, perceived harm, familiarity with the movie the scene is from, and setting a minimum age limit for viewing that movie. Three Likert-scale items were used for assessing personal offensiveness for each clip on a 5-point scale, from 1 (least) to 5 (most). For the personal offensiveness items, subjects were asked to report their levels of offense, discomfort, or irritation after watching the scene. Six Likert-scale items were used for assessing perceived harm on "children" and "adults" as they relate to the clip. Again, a 5-point scale was used, from 1 (least) to 5 (most). Subjects were asked about their familiarity with the movie from which each clip comes. The final item that appeared after each clip is the minimum age limit question. It is an open-ended question: "How old should a person be before seeing a movie with a scene like this in it?" The questionnaire also included demographic questions, and two items addressing

whether or not subjects ever heard of the third-person effect, and, in an open-ended follow-up question, if they could state the nature of the central hypothesis.

Scene selection

The four scenes chosen as the stimuli for this survey come from theatrically released movies produced after 1990. The movies that the scenes are extracted from are *Searching for Bobby Fischer, Kama Sutra, Natural Born Killers,* and *Showgirls.* The four scenes correspond to all possible combinations of the two primary stimulus independent variables, providing the "low sex/low violence" (*Searching for Bobby Fischer*), "high sex/low violence" (*Kama Sutra*), "low sex/high violence" (*Natural Born Killers*), and "high sex/high violence" (*Showgirls*) categories.

The "low sex/low violence" scene is from the film *Searching for Bobby Fischer.* In the scene, a man and his son play a game of chess. Through dialogue, it is made clear that the child, a chess prodigy, let his father beat him in a previous game. They play a new game, and the child defeats his father. The scene is rendered comically; while the father painstakingly ponders his moves, the child is shown playing Mousetrap with his younger sister, on the phone with a friend, and finally, taking a bath. The boy spends only seconds deciding on each move, and checkmates his father by calling out his final move from the upstairs bathroom.

The "low sex/high violence" scene is from the movie *Natural Born Killers.* It takes place in a diner, and involves the assault and murder of five people by the film's two main characters (a husband and wife on a crime spree). The scene begins with a confrontation between an obnoxious patron and the wife character, escalates into a violent fight and ends with her cutting his throat. The husband character mutilates and then murders the obnoxious patron's friend with a knife, which he then uses to kill a bystander. The happy couple revels in their deeds as the husband shoots two waitresses in their heads.

The "high sex/low violence" scene is from the movie *Kama Sutra.* In this scene, a man and woman are involved in consensual (simulated) sexual intercourse. Both characters are shown to be enjoying the experience. Frontal nudity of the female character is shown, including pubic hair. No frontal male nudity is shown.

Finally, the "high sex/high violence" scene is from the film *Showgirls.* In the scene, a woman is introduced to a male rock star at a party. She is obviously enamored with him. In the next scene, they are shown kissing in an upstairs bedroom. As they make their way to the bed, two other men enter the room. Realizing what the men have in mind, the woman tries to escape. While the two men hold her, the rock star slaps, and then punches, the woman in the face. They then throw her on the bed, turn her on her stomach, and rip off her underwear. As two men hold her down, one man rapes her. The woman's pain and unwillingness is portrayed. Subjects were not told the names of the films that the scenes were taken from, only that "the clips are from movies that played in theaters during the 1990s."

Since a primary goal of this study is to assess subjects' attitudes toward violent and sexual material independent of one another, two of the scenes (from *Kama Sutra* and *Natural Born Killers*) were designated as being "exclusively" violent or sexual in a previous study (Leone, 1999).

Results

For the entire group of subjects (N=96), percentages for categorical and ordinal level variables are in Tables 1-2. The majority of subjects are female (61.5%) and white (80.2%). 12.5% of subjects reported being familiar with the third-person effect, but, on a subsequent open-ended question, none was able to correctly summarize it in one sentence.

The following three tables (Tables 3-5) contain descriptive statistics for all interval- and ratio-level variables for the entire group of subjects. Table 3 includes variables related to personal offensiveness after viewing one of the four movie clips. Table 4 contains means and standard deviations for variables related to subjects' perceived harmfulness of the movie clip they had just seen. Like the personal offensiveness items, perceived harmfulness variables were measured on Likert-scales, with higher values corresponding to greater perceived harm.

Reliability Analyses for Scales

Five scales were used for hypothesis tests in this study. Three Likert-scale items were combined to form the personal offensiveness scale (alpha = .91). Subjects were asked their level of agreement with statements addressing how offended, uncomfortable, or irritated they were by the movie clip they had previously viewed. Six Likert-scale items were combined to form the perceived harmfulness scale (alpha = .91). Subjects were asked their level of agreement with statements dealing with desensitization of children, desensitization of adults, imitation by children, imitation by adults, children's aggression, and adults' aggression, relative to the movie clip they had previously viewed. In addition, the perceived harmfulness items were separated into the three effects on children statements (alpha = .86) and three effects on adults statements (alpha = .84).

Research Hypotheses

For H1, it was predicted that people who watched the "high sex/low violence" clip would be more offended than those who saw "low sex and high violence"; the results of an ANOVA indicated that they were not (Table 5). Subjects were more offended by "high sexual" content than "low sexual" content, and more offended by "high violence" movie content than by "low violence" movie content, but the interaction results were in the opposite direction than was

predicted. The "high sex/low violence" group mean (2.24) was lower than the "low sex/high violence" mean (2.88). This disparity emerges in the main effects means as well. The mean difference between people who saw "high violence" content (3.16) and "low violence" content (1.78) surpassed the one between people who viewed "high sex" content (2.84) and "low sex" content (2.11). Apparently, people are more offended by a highly violent clip like *Natural Born Killers* than by a highly sexual one like *Kama Sutra.*

Although the interaction of sex and violence did not yield a significant result, in terms of the four experimental cohorts, subjects in the "low sex/low violence" group reported levels of personal offensiveness lower than the other three groups (1.33). In terms of individual offensiveness items, they were largely not irritated (1.43), made uncomfortable by (1.35), or offended by (1.29) the *Searching for Bobby Fischer* clip. Subjects in the "low sex/high violence" group (2.88) reported levels of personal offensiveness that are relatively high on individual items, feeling more uncomfortable (3.43) than offended (2.96) or irritated (2.83) by the *Natural Born Killers* clip. On individual offense items, people in the "high sex/low violence" cohort (2.24) reported feeling more uncomfortable (2.74) than irritated (2.09) or offended (1.91) by the *Kama Sutra* clip. They were relatively untroubled by the scene of female-initiated, consensual sex with a male partner. Lastly, subjects in the "high sex/high violence" group reported the highest levels of personal offensiveness of all experimental cohorts (3.45), feeling more uncomfortable (3.67) than irritated (3.56) or offended (3.07) by the *Showgirls* clip.

It was also hypothesized that people who saw the "low sex/high violence" clip would perceive it as being more harmful than people who viewed the "high sex/low violence" clip (H2). The interaction of sexual and violent content indicated in the ANOVA test (Table 6) indicates that there was a significant difference between experimental groups ($F = 11.78$, $p<.001$).

Tukey's post-hoc test indicates that hypothesis 2, which predicts a difference between the "low sex/high violence" group (3.10) and the "high sex/low violence" group (2.58), is supported.[3] People who saw *Natural Born Killers* perceived it as being more harmful than those who saw *Kama Sutra.* The post-hoc test indicates that there was a significant difference between these two groups' means at the .05 level. In addition, the Tukey post-hoc test indicates a significant difference between the "high sex/low violence" group (2.58) and the "high sex/high violence" group (3.24) at the .05 level. The "low sex/low violence" group (1.42) was shown to be significantly different from all three other groups at the .001 level.

H3 looked to see if a specific behavior—the setting of a minimum age limit for viewing a film—would follow a similar path as the attitudes and beliefs examined in the first two hypotheses. Table 7 contains the ANOVA for H3. An interaction between the effects of viewing sex and violence and setting a minimum age limit was examined. Like the previous two interaction hypotheses, it was hypothesized that people who saw "high sex/low violence" content would set a higher minimum age limit for viewing it than people who saw "low sex/high violence" content. Table 7 indicates that the interaction between sex and violence is significant ($F = 56.08$, $p<.001$). Tukey's post-hoc test indicates, however, that H3 is not supported. While the mean minimum age for viewing "high sex/low violence" (17.41) is higher than the one for viewing "low sex/high violence" (16.41), the difference is not significant. In fact, the "low sex/low violence" minimum age for viewing (7.75) is the only significantly different mean in this interaction ($p<.001$). It is significantly different from each of the other three experimental groups.

The final hypothesis (H4) returns to the central question of this study: For highly sexual and/or violent content, does personal offensiveness have a greater effect than perceived

harmfulness on setting a minimum age limit for viewing a movie containing that kind of content? For the hypothesis, subjects who viewed the "low sex/low violence" clip were excluded from the hierarchical regression analysis that was performed, because it was felt that their responses would not be related to levels of either sexual or violent content.[4] As far as individual experimental cohorts are concerned, two groups—"low sex/high violence" and "high sex/high violence"—followed the predicted pattern in H4. For subjects in the "low sex/low violence" group and the "high sex/low violence" group, neither personal offensiveness nor perceived harmfulness accounted for a significant change in the minimum age dependent variable. For the former group, this again relates to the low levels of personal offense and perceived harm associated with the clip from *Searching for Bobby Fischer.* For the latter group, this points to the finding that despite reporting levels of personal offensiveness and perceived harmfulness that were relatively low, subjects set a minimum age limit for viewing *Kama Sutra* that was relatively high.

For the three groups who saw some combination of highly sexual and/or highly violent content, H4 is supported (Table 8). Demographic variables in the first block of the regression table, such as age, gender, level of education, and parents' levels of education did not demonstrate a significant change in the minimum age limit dependent variable. Parental status, however, did (beta = -.26, $p<.05$), suggesting that having children did make a difference in the setting of minimum age limits for viewing films that contained explicit sex and/or violence by subjects. Parents were more inclined to set a higher minimum age limit than non-parents. More importantly, in terms of setting a minimum age limit for viewing a movie containing highly sexual and/or violent content like they saw, subjects' personal offensiveness (beta = .54, $p<.001$) substantially outweighed their perceived harmfulness (beta = -.09, ns). Overall,

subjects' personal offensiveness accounted for nearly one-fifth of the change in the dependent variable (r^2 change = .19, $p<.001$). Clearly, personal offensiveness had a greater effect on the decision to set a minimum age for viewing highly sexual and/or highly violent movie content than perceived harmfulness.

Discussion

Critics of the MPAA charge that the film rating system is inherently flawed, because decisions are not based on what is potentially harmful to children, but what offends adults (Cantor et al. 1998; Farber, 1972; Linz et al. 1992; Ramos, 1990; Wilson et al. 1990). The scientific community (Cantor et al. 1998; Linz et al. 1992; Wilson et al. 1990) and other groups are concerned with the negative effects of violent content, sexual content, or a combination of the two on children, and view the ratings system as inadequately protecting children from potentially harmful material, and inappropriately focused on sexual content over violent content.

The third-person effect (Davison, 1983) provides a theoretical framework for this study. The "classic" third-person hypothesis is a perceptual one, and it addresses people's belief that others are more affected by media messages than they themselves are (Davison, 1983). Here, in a variation of the "classic" design, subjects were asked to assess the harmful effects of the media message on others, and, in lieu of doing the same for themselves, were instead asked to register their level of personal offensiveness. This departure from the conventional third-person model takes into account the criticism of movie ratings noted above, and is intended to add to existing research exploring perceptual dimensions underlying the third-person perception (e.g., Salwen & Dupagne, 1999).

A 2x2 factorial experiment was conducted in order to test research hypotheses in this study. Research hypotheses addressed personal offensiveness to sexual or violent content,

perceived harmfulness of sexual or violent content, and minimum ages for viewing each. First, it was suggested that subjects would be more offended by highly sexual content than by highly violent content. This was not supported. For the second group of hypotheses it was believed that subjects would perceive highly violent content as being more harmful than highly sexual content. This was supported. Finally, it was hypothesized that subjects would set a higher minimum age limit for viewing highly sexual content than for viewing highly violent content. This was not supported. The final hypothesis addressed the study's core issue: personal offensiveness to highly sexual and/or highly violent content has a greater effect on a person's setting of a minimum age limit for viewing movies containing material of each type than perceived harmfulness of the content. This was supported.

One of the primary goals of this study was to detect differences in the responses of people who saw a "low sex/high violence" clip (*Natural Born Killers*) and a "high sex/ low violence" one (*Kama Sutra*). As expected, subjects found the highly violent clip as being more harmful; an unexpected result was that they found it as being more offensive also. This attempt to separate personal offensiveness from perceived harmfulness and measure the two independently was done to engage critics' (Farber, 1972; Ramos, 1990; Wilson et al. 1990) charge that film ratings decisions are often based on the former when they should be based on the latter.

The results of this study indicate that despite being somewhat more "turned off" by highly violent content than by highly sexual content, and perceiving violence as being significantly more harmful to viewers than sex, people will still set minimum age limits for viewing sex (17.41) slightly higher than for viewing violence (16.41 years old). Perhaps these findings support the belief that in our "culture of violence," (Svetkey, 1999) people, regardless of how harmful or offended they are by violent material, will be less restrictive towards it, believing

that young people are surrounded by, and come into contact with, violent media content on a daily basis, and restricting access to it is not as necessary as restricting access to sexual content. Apparently, subjects in this study deemed a consensual yet explicit sex scene between a man and a woman as more "adult" material than a graphically violent scene.

While critics charge the MPAA with being more concerned with "how much" is shown than with context (Wilson et al. 1990), people appear to take a scene's context into account congruently with its explicitness. In the *National Television Violence Study* (1997), researchers contemplated the importance of context of media violence. They found that some aspects of a violent portrayal—such as its being unjustified, or how the consequences for either the perpetrator or victim are portrayed—actually had a negative relationship with harmful effects measures employed in the study. This may be what is reflected by the departure from what was expected by the subjects in the "high sex/high violence" group. The rape scene was completely unjustified and focused on the victim's pain and suffering. Thus, subjects perceived lower levels of harmfulness than expected, but were the most repulsed by what they saw. This also adds to the belief that people's level of offensiveness will provide better evidence for what they will be more restrictive toward than their perceived harmfulness level, as subjects set a minimum age limit for viewing *Showgirls* at just over 18 years of age.

In the conventional third-person perception model, subjects are asked questions about the effects of a given stimulus on themselves and on others (Davison, 1983). The difference between people's assessments of effects on self and others comprises the "perceptual" component of the third-person effect. Based on the results of this study it is reasonable to conclude that, when watching highly sexual and or violent content, subjects supported censoring material that upset them more than material that they found harmful to others. This coincides

with the beliefs of critics of film ratings (Farber, 1972; Ramos, 1990; Wilson et al. 1990), and the findings of one study that made a similar division among perceptual dimensions (Salwen & Dupagne, 1999). Findings here support the utility of making this distinction, especially when the stimulus is sexual or violent content. Ways of separating and measuring personal offensiveness, or other responses related to how a particular media message makes a person feel, is both necessary and telling. Measures of personal offensiveness may be stronger, more valid indicators of both a third-person perception and effect. If personal offensiveness measures can be worked into a study in the "classic" third-person mold, further support may be found for the idea that people support censoring media examples that they don't like more readily than ones that they think are harmful. Secondly, the important finding that people may dislike, or otherwise be troubled by, media content without finding it harmful could be used to better understand the behavioral component of the third-person effect. Ultimately, the evidence certainly points to a need to *not* group these things together under an "umbrella" term like "social desirability of the message" (McLeod et al. 1999).

The most serious challenges to this study come in the form of external validity. In terms of the most important dependent variable—setting a minimum age limit for viewing a movie—the results reflect what goes on when the MPAA assigns a rating to a film extremely accurately. People's level of offensiveness was a better indicator of what kind of content they would be more restrictive toward than their level of perceived harmfulness was. Subjects could legitimately be accused of basing their decision on the same thing as Classification and Ratings Administration (CARA) parents do. But, in terms of subjects' actual responses, the overall homogeneity of the group poses a problem. Most of the people in this study are not parents, and they are all old enough to see any movie they choose. Thus, other than personal feelings or

attitudes toward artistic freedom and censorship, they have relatively little at stake when viewing the clip.

It would be ideal to look at groups who do have something at stake: teenagers under the age of 17 and parents of these (and perhaps even younger) children. In the *National Television Violence Study* (1997), when given the choice between viewing a movie with a G, PG, PG-13, or R rating, more boys aged 10-14 chose an R-rated movie than a PG-rated one. Unfortunately, this material cannot be shown to 10-year olds, no matter how much they want to see it (or may have seen it already on videocassette).[5] But, parents of children under 17 years old, who ratings are "for" (Valenti, 2000), could be used, and, having more "at stake" than the college students used in this study, is the next logical step for research of this kind.

While personal offensiveness was shown to have a greater effect on a "censorious" behavior than perceived harmfulness, one thing is clear in this study. Participants are more comfortable with younger people watching explicit violence than explicit sex, despite reporting higher levels of personal offensiveness and perceived harm for the former than the latter. Thus, the critics (Farber, 1972; Ramos, 1990; Wilson et al. 1990) are only partially right. Apparently, people's willingness to censor a media product does relate more to how much it offends them than by how harmful they think it is. Even more apparent is that they believe sex, "adult" material as it's often called, should only be seen by adults, a belief that supercedes any other considerations in this study.

Table 1. Percentages for gender, race, ethnicity, education level, and father's education level.

Variables	%
Gender	
Female	61.5
Male	38.5
	100.0%
	(N=96)
Race	
American Indian/Alaskan Native	2.1
Asian	3.2
African-American	3.1
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	1.0
White	80.2
Other	9.4
	100.0%
	(N=95)
Ethnicity	
Hispanic or Latino	5.6
Not Hispanic or Latino	94.4
	100.0%
	(N=90)
Education Level	
High School	12.5
Freshman year of college	21.9
Sophomore year of college	25.0
Junior year of college	25.0
Associate Degree-Academic	8.3
Associate Degree-Occupational/Technical	2.1
Other	5.2
	100.0%
	(N=96)
Father's education level	
High School	39.8
Freshman year of college	5.4
Sophomore year of college	2.2
Junior year of college	1.1
Associate Degree-academic	2.2
Associate Degree-occupational/technical	9.7
Bachelor's Degree	16.1
Master's Degree	10.8
Professional Degree	3.2
Doctorate Degree	9.7
	100.0%
	(N=93)

Table 2. Percentages for mother's education level, parental status, knowledge of movie shown, and knowledge of third-person effect.

Variables	%
Mother's education level	
High School	34.8
Freshman year of college	4.3
Sophomore year of college	5.4
Junior year of college	2.2
Associate Degree-academic	6.5
Associate Degree-occupational/technical	10.9
Bachelor's Degree	20.7
Master's Degree	12.0
Professional Degree	2.2
Doctorate Degree	1.1
	100.0%
	(N=92)
Parental Status	
Parent	12.5
Non-parent	87.5
	100.0%
	(N=96)
Familiarity with movie clip shown	
Not seen movie/don't know title	45.7
Not seen movie/may know title	14.9
May have seen movie/scene not familiar	8.5
May have seen movie/scene looks familiar	7.4
Seen movie/remember this scene	23.4
	100.0%
	(N=94)
Knows title of movie that clip is from	
Does not know title	55.2
Gave incorrect title	3.1
Knows title	41.7
	100.0%
	(N=96)
Familiar with third-person effect	
Yes*	12.5
No	87.5
	100.0%
	(N=96)

*On a subsequent open-ended question, none of the subjects who reported being familiar with the third-person effect could summarize it in one sentence.

Table 3. Means and standard deviations for personal offensiveness to movie clip, minimum age for viewing movie clip, age, and income.

Variables	Mean	Std. Dev.	N
This scene made me uncomfortable.*	2.83	1.34	96
This scene irritated me.*	2.52	1.30	96
This scene offended me.*	2.29	1.26	96
Personal offensiveness scale.**	2.55	1.20	96
How old should a person be before they see a movie with a scene like this in it? (in years)	15.07	4.86	96
Age (in years)	22.82	6.11	96
Personal Income***	2.01	1.76	90

*Responses were coded: 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly agree.

**Average of three personal offensiveness items above, from 5 = most offended to 1 = least offended.

*** Responses were coded: 1 = $10,000 or less, 2 = $10,001-20,000, 3 = $20,001-30,000, 4 = $30,001-$40,000, 5 = 40,001-$50,000, 6 = $50,001-$60,000, 7 = $60,001-$70,000, 8 = $70,001-$80,000, 9 = $80,001-$90,000, 10 = $90,001 or more.

Table 4. Means and standard deviations for perceived harm of movie clip.

Variables	Mean	Std. Dev.	N
Movies with scenes like this desensitize children to consequences of events like this in the real world.*	3.06	1.24	96
Movies with scenes like this desensitize adults to consequences of events like this in the real world.*	2.73	1.12	96
Children who watch movies with scenes like this behave more aggressively than those who don't.*	2.68	1.25	96
Movies with scenes like this are the kinds children watch, get bad ideas from, and may want to copy.*	2.64	1.27	96
Adults who watch movies with scenes like this behave more aggressively than those who don't.*	2.45	1.11	96
Movies with scenes like this are the kinds adults watch, get bad ideas from, and may want to copy.*	2.43	1.14	96
Perceived harm scale.**	2.66	.99	96
Perceived harm on children scale.***	2.79	1.10	96
Perceived harm on adults scale.****	2.53	.98	96

*Responses were coded: 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly agree.

** Scale is the average of six items above, from 5 = most perceived harm to 1 = least perceived harm.

***Scale is the average of movie clip desensitizes children, children imitate, and increases children's aggression, from 5 = most perceived harm to 1 = least perceived harm.

****Scale is the average of movie clip desensitizes adults, adults imitate, and increases adults' aggression, from 5 = most perceived harm to 1 = least perceived harm.

Table 5. Two-way Analysis of Variance of sexual content and violent content on personal offensiveness.

	Personal Offensiveness*			
Main Effects and Interactions	Mean	Std. Dev.	F	sig.
Sexual Content			16.07	p<.001
Low sex	2.11	1.31		
High sex	2.84	.98		
Violent Content			56.42	p<.001
Low violence	1.78	.75		
High violence	3.16	1.07		
Interaction of sex and violence			.86	ns
Low sex/Low violence	1.33	.41		
Low sex/High violence	2.88	1.30		
High sex/Low violence	2.24	.73		
High sex/High violence	3.45	.83		

*The average of offensiveness, irritation, and comfort level after seeing the movie clip, from 5 = most offended to 1 = least offended.

Table 6. Two-way Analysis of Variance of sexual content and violent content on perceived harmfulness.

	Perceived Harmfulness*			
Main Effects and Interactions	Mean	Std. Dev.	F	sig.
Sexual Content			19.24	p<.001
Low sex	2.26	1.18		
High sex	2.91	.68		
Violent Content			62.83	p<.001
Low violence	2.00	.78		
High violence	3.17	.80		
Interaction of sex and violence			11.78	p<.001
Low sex/Low violence	1.42	.52		
Low sex/High violence	3.10	1.00		
High sex/Low violence	2.58	.61		
High sex/High violence	3.24	.59		

*The average of movie clip desensitizes children, children imitate, increases children's aggression, desensitizes adults, adults imitate, and increases adults' aggression, from 5 = most perceived harm to 1 = least perceived harm.

Table 7. Two-way Analysis of Variance of sexual content and violent content on minimum age for viewing.

Minimum Age for Viewing (In years)*

Main Effects and Interactions	Mean	Std. Dev.	F	sig.
Sexual Content			113.02	p<.001
Low sex	12.08	5.35		
High sex	17.75	1.93		
Violent Content			76.64	p<.001
Low violence	12.58	5.62		
High violence	17.25	2.33		
Interaction of sex and violence			56.08	p<.001
Low sex/Low violence	7.75	3.31		
Low sex/High violence	16.41	2.27		
High sex/Low violence	17.41	1.53		
High sex/High violence	18.08	2.21		

*Response to the open-ended question, "How old should a person be before they see a movie with a scene like this [the one they just viewed] in it?"

Table 8. Hierarchical regression analysis of demographic variables, personal offensiveness, and perceived harm on setting minimum age limits for viewing, N=73.

Blocks of independent variables	Std. beta	R-square change	Total R-square	Adjusted R-square
1. Demographic variables				
--Age	-.04			
--Gender (Male = 1)	-.11			
--Parental status (Not a parent = 1)	-.26[a]			
--Education Level	.03			
--Father's education level	.09			
--Mother's education level	-.21	.21[a]	.21[a]	.13[a]
2. Personal offense/perceived harm				
--Offended by movie clip*	.54[c]			
--Harmfulness of movie clip**	-.09	.19[c]	.40[a]	.32[a]

[a]p<.05
[b]p<.01
[c]p<.001

*The average of offensiveness, irritation, and comfort level after seeing the movie clip, from 5 = most offended to 1 = least offended.

**The average of movie clip desensitizes children, children imitate, increases children's aggression, desensitizes adults, adults imitate, and increases adults' aggression, from 5 = most perceived harm to 1 = least perceived harm.

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Endnotes

[1] The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) replaced the Production Code Administration (PCA) with an age-based, voluntary ratings system in 1968. Under Jack Valenti, the Classification and Ratings Administration (CARA) was formed and given the responsibility of assigning ratings to films. Although originally comprised of people left over from the PCA, mental health professionals and two student interns, the make up of CARA has changed. Today, the ratings board is staffed by "non-professionals" whose primary criterion for inclusion is that they have children (Valenti, 2000).

[2] In 1968, the Supreme Court ruled on two cases, *Ginsberg v. New York* and *Interstate Circuit v. Dallas,* upholding the constitutionality of variable obscenity (i.e., material that is acceptable for adults can be unacceptable for children).

[3] According to Hopkins, Hopkins & Glass (1996), "Although in the derivation of the Tukey method all means are assumed to be based on the same number of observations, a modification proposed by Kramer (1956) has been shown to yield accurate results with unequal *n*'s (Smith, 1971)" (footnote, p 295). This requires a slight change in one of the formulas used that corresponds to the unequal sample sizes.

[4] For all subjects, when controlling for demographic variables, neither personal offensiveness nor perceived harmfulness accounted for a significant change in the dependent variable.

[5] This mirrors a curious, oddly comic, result of the study. A small number of subjects actually set a higher minimum age limit for viewing the clip they saw then their actual age. Whether they realized it or not, they were essentially saying that they should not be allowed to see the clip they just saw.

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